



Published on GazetteNET (<http://www.gazettenet.com>)

House OKs money to keep UMass drug lab open

By Ben Storrow

Created 10/06/2011 - 5:00am

- [amherst](#)
- [local](#)
- [news](#)
- [umass amherst](#)

AMHERST - In a nearly unanimous vote, the state House of Representatives voted Wednesday to approve a \$506 million supplemental budget that includes \$300,000 to keep the drug analysis laboratory at the University of Massachusetts Amherst open through the end of the fiscal year.

The laboratory, the sole facility in the region that weighs and tests illegal drugs confiscated by police, had been scheduled to close Sept. 30 as part of the wider budget cuts enacted by the state earlier in the year.

But that generated considerable opposition among local law enforcement officials, prompting western Massachusetts legislators to seek \$300,000 to keep the laboratory operating through June 30. That money was included in the supplemental budget approved by the House 147-1 on Wednesday.

The budget now goes to the Senate, which is also expected to approve money for the laboratory.

"This was negotiated by the House and Senate," said state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst. "It is my understanding, according to the state Department of Public Health, that the governor's office was not unsympathetic to this."

State Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington, said including the drug laboratory in the supplemental budget "really was a team effort with the entire western Massachusetts delegation from all four counties, along with local law enforcement and the district attorney's offices.

"Closing (the lab) just made no sense from a fiscal and logistical perspective," Kulik added. "This is a regional service that had to be maintained because it would be a huge burden on western Massachusetts if it were closed."

The supplemental budget, which was initially filed in August by Gov. Deval Patrick after the state's tax collections for the last fiscal year exceeded their projected levels, also restores money for other items that had previously been cut from the spending plan for the year beginning July 1. Those include \$20 million for the state's trial courts, \$8.2 million to fund a clothing allowance program for low-income children and \$500,000 for HIV prevention services.

The supplemental budget also provides \$10 million to help cover costs incurred by the tornado that struck Springfield and other parts of western Massachusetts on June 1, as well \$6.2 million to reimburse communities for damages sustained during the 2008 ice storm.

State Rep. Ellen Story, D-Amherst, applauded the restoration of the clothing allowance for low-income children, saying "this was on top of my list of priorities."

Kulik said the budget is "fiscally prudent," adding that its investment of \$350 million in the state's reserve fund would bring the total in that account to over \$1 billion.

"We are only one of four states in the country to have over \$1 billion in our reserve account," Kulik said.

The drug analysis laboratory twice before had almost been closed by the state, in 1989 and 2009,

Local law enforcement authorities had argued that closing the lab would mean that police departments in western Massachusetts would have to send personnel to the state Department of Public Health laboratory in Jamaica Plain to deliver drug samples. That would be expensive and time-consuming, local authorities said.

Kulik said legislators in the coming months will review how the state can reform the entire system to determine how drug testing services can be delivered more efficiently. He added that there is separate funding for drug testing through the Worcester County District Attorney's office and the state police.

"We should use this as an opportunity to take a global view, a big-picture overview of what we're doing and how we can improve it going forward," Kulik said. "Getting a handle on what agencies provide what in terms of drug testing, (and) where they are located, may result in a more logical system for the entire state, including western Massachusetts."

Daily Hampshire Gazette © 2011 All rights reserved

Source URL: <http://www.gazettenet.com/2011/10/06/house-oks-money-to-keep-umass-drug-lab-open>